

[A Nice Quiet Little Bar]

Roaldus Richmond "Men Against Granite"

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A NICE QUIET LITTLE BAR

They called him Firpo because of his size. There was nothing of Firpo in his face however, for it was a calm face, pale and plump from soft-living indoors. Only in the mild eyes was a hint of restrained fires, danger-lights. Many a pugnacious drunk had been fooled by his mildness of speech and appearance. When Firpo went into action it was explosive and irresistible. Men flew like sacks of straw before his terrible hands. Naturally pleasant and friendly, Firp never sought trouble — but when it came he was ready. With his left hand he would hoist the offender half-across the bar, and then unleash a right that invariably knocked the victim clear across the room. Firpo was Spanish.

"Yeah, I been in this town about twenty-five years now," he said. "I guess I been tending bar here about twenty years. Not this same bar, of course. A lot of it was bootleg stuff you know. It had to be. I was only a kid when I came, and it was an accident. I went on a bat with some guys, starting in Boston, and woke up in Barre. I been here ever since. I was born in Quincy, Massachusetts. My old man was a stonecutter down there. He wanted me to go in the sheds but I didn't want to. I wanted to go in the ring. I thought sure as hell I was a champ — until I tried it a couple times. I was lucky not to get killed. I didn't know nothing except to go in swinging. A kike in South Boston flattened me; a Polack in Providence 2 knocked my can off. I quit. I was under twenty then, just a punk kid.

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"My old man came over from Spain, but I never seen the country, I wouldn't want to now. Ain't it hell what they're doing over there? I tried to get in the army in '17. They wouldn't take me on account of flat feet. What the hell difference does flat feet make? I had to laugh when I saw some of the birds they did take. I coulda smeared six of 'em at once. When they did take me it was too late to get across, I was young enough to be sorry then, like a goddamn fool, but I know better now. I been through a Veteran's Hospital once. They oughta make everybody go through one of 'em.

"Well, when we came to in that hotel room in Barre we was a pretty sad bunch. The guy with the car had left us, lammed out and left us flat. We didn't know what the hell to do. I didn't dare wire home for money, and neither did Jake. The other guy wired home, got the dough, and went back to Wollaston. There was nothing for me and Jake to do but go to work. And when you go to work in Barre it means working in the stonesheds. Figure it out. There's a capital investment of twelve million dollars in the industry. Barre district covers a fifty-mile radius. It produces one-third of the granite memorials for this country. Out of Barre's 11,000 population, about 4000 are in the granite industry.

"You know it's a funny thing. Back home my old man had tried to got me into the sheds and I wouldn't go. I couldn't see it, I was having too much fun playing around. [Jeese?], my father used to get disgusted with me, and looking back on it 3 I don't blame him a bit. I was a no-good kid, all right. Then as soon as I hit this town I go to work in a shed. My first job was grunting. The grunts do all the odd jobs around a shed, the dirty and heavy work. I was strong enough for that but I can't say I liked it. Jake's still cutting stone here today.

"When I got my first check I sent a slice of it home. I bet it was the first time in his life he was ever proud of me. He wrote back asking as to come home and work there. But I had got to like Barre by then, and you know how you feel, the first real money you earn.

"Stonecutting was all right for Jake but not for me. He liked it. Hell, if I'd stayed there I'd still be lumping or some stooge job. I didn't stick very long, only a couple years or so.

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“After that I tried a lot of things. I worked in restaurants. I worked in stores. I even worked on a farm. Once I was a night-watchman. I picked up a little extra jack, boxing and wrestling at carnivals and fairs, in different towns round the State. I was good enough to get by up here in the sticks. Then I drove a truck. All the time I was drinking and leading a hell of a life.

“Then I got to gambling. Every night it was poker or dice. This gang I got in with was running booze, and they ran a blind pig, too. After they cleaned me out I lost my job — wrecked the truck one day and the boss said I was drunk, but it was really just a hangover and being up all night. The gang liked me and they gave me a job driving a booze car down from Canada. I got a hundred bucks a week for three trips. When they lost 4 some of their cars they took mine away from me. They put me to serving drinks in their speak then, waiting on trade, you know. They had an old broken-down bartender that could really mix 'em. He'd worked in big hotel bars in New York, Boston, Montreal, and he'd worked on big ships crossing the Atlantic. It was from him I learned to mix 'em.

“We get all kinds of trade here, all kinds of people. I get alone fine with the stonecutters, they're my best customers. They get a little loud once in awhile when they're arguing. But they like me, they'll listen to me. Sometimes they feel like scrapping and I have to cut in. They have fights of course — but not in here. A couple winters ago there was a stabbing down the street, put a guy in the hospital awhile. After one high school football game there was fighting all over town. This spring one of the Union leaders got his leg broke in a brawl. Stonecutters are almost always good guys, regular, you know what I mean. I don't know why but they are. Like newspapermen and ball players and guys like that. They're decent and honest, too. If they're a little wild, who isn't that's got any blood and guts in him? I get along fine with the stonecutters. I like to see 'em come in.

“I have more trouble with the country club crowd and tourists. Punks like that. They get a couple cocktails under their belt and they got to show off in front of their women. It's dopes like that that burn me up. They can't drink and they can't fight, but a few shots and they got

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to show off. Another bunch that gets in my hair is this bunch of lollypops from Norwich. I've served plenty college kids, and some damn 5 nice ones, but those dillies!

"One night three of the monkeys were in here showing their girls what hell-of-a-guys they were. One of them crashed his glass off the wall. He was reaching in his pocket with one hand, and reaching for another glass with the other. "How much these glasses cost?" he said. I grabbed his wrist before he got to the glass. "You ain't got enough money to pay for 'em," I said. The other two jumped me, and I threw all three of 'em out.

"But we don't have much trouble in here. Don't think things like that happen every night. Maybe a couple times a year is all. This is a nice quiet bar. A gentleman can enjoy his drinks in peace and quiet. And a lady, too. No lady is ever going to get insulted in any bar I work.

"The boss gave me hell once, said I was driving some of his best customers over to the Elks Club. I said that was a good place for 'em. I said: "What you call your best customers drive more real good business outa here, than Hitler has drove Jews outa Germany!" I seen these Elks Club. They get away with stuff there that I wouldn't stand for here. Of course some of the Elks, just like some of the Norwich boys, are o. k. guys. But take 'em by and large — you can have 'em.

"I'm a pretty good-natured guy. I can take a lot before I start burning up. You got to take a lot in this racket, and I can take it. But there's a limit to everything. I try to be nice to everybody. The stonecutters would go to bat for me, I know that. If I was in a jam or something they'd come through. And they're tough babies too, good ones to have on 6 your side.

"It's a nice little bar, cool and quiet. Of course there's that phonograph, and this jitterbug music drives me nuts. I like music that's slow and sweet and sad. Wishing, that's a good

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number. Let me mix you a real drink. I don't touch it myself now, I don't touch a drop. I haven't for years."